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**Title:** IN MY OPINION: TIMBER PLAN - The BLM's dreaming about giving logging a big boost

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Rural Oregonians should take note of the recent release of the Bureau of Land Management's revised timber-cutting plan for western Oregon.

What the BLM calls the Western Oregon Plan Revision will guide the management of more than 2.2 million acres of federal timber lands in Oregon that have played a central role in our way of life, our economy and our county governments for decades.

The BLM proposes to return logging levels back to the 1980s, when many of Oregon's rural counties were flush in timber dollars. Unfortunately, the federal agency's attempt to turn back the clock delivers a real blow to efforts by timber-dependent county governments throughout Oregon to make a long overdue transition into the 21st century.

Surely bureau officials would agree that it is highly unlikely that these forest lands will ever produce the level of timber receipts we saw in the 1980s, because federal land-management laws simply won't allow it. Given that dose of reality, the bureau's preferred alternative in the plan would only serve to distract and confuse citizens in timber-dependent counties that are faced with the task of developing local funding sources to replace diminishing federal payments.

During the 1960s, '70s, and '80s these BLM-controlled lands provided logs that fueled local economies throughout rural Oregon. Timber receipts generated by these lands paid for county services such as sheriff's patrols, jails, libraries, public health, roads and many other essential programs. In fact, there was so much cash rolling in from timber receipts in the 1970s that Josephine County government didn't levy any property taxes for county operations.

In the 1990s, the continued cutting of old growth began to bump up against the National Clean Water Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act and other federal environmental laws. Court decisions based on these laws were conclusive: The clear-cutting of old growth forests conflicted with a plethora of federal environmental laws. Since the early 1990s, federal forests have produced anemic harvest levels --and timber receipts for rural Oregon counties plummeted to near zero. Since then, Congress has stepped in to provide "safety net funding" to 18 of Oregon's 36 counties so that rural communities can continue to provide basic services to their citizens.

While timber-dependent county governments have struggled to transition from high timber harvests, the private sector in affected communities like Grants Pass and Medford has come a long way in its economic transition to tourism, health care and service jobs that serve the region's growing community of retirees. Today, census statistics reflect a Grants Pass economy that is now stronger than it has ever been. From 1960 through 1990, Josephine County median household income consistently ranked in the bottom three among Oregon's 36 counties. By 2006, the county had moved up several notches to No. 29, thanks to a 16 percent surge in the median household income, the second-highest increase in Oregon. Jackson County was No. 14.

While businesses and residents have adapted to the new economy, most timber-dependent county governments in Oregon still rely on federal safety net funds. For example, more than 65 percent of Josephine County's general fund is financed by "safety net" payments.

So why have so many counties failed to make the inevitable transition?

In the last May election, many of these counties attempted to pass local tax levies of some sort to begin the transition, but in every case the voters said no. During levy campaigns last spring, Oregon congressional delegates assured their constituents that they were going to secure an extension of safety net funds. Many county commissioners like myself were hopeful that Sen. Ron Wyden and the Oregon delegation would prevail --and sure enough they did --if only for one more year. You can bet that those voters who voted no on these levies because they were banking on Congress to deliver were feeling pretty smug.

Now the BLM has sent a strong signal to our citizens that they still need not make the transition toward self-sufficiency. The bureau proposes a return to harvest levels of the 1980s so that timber receipts can once again pay for county services. For rural Oregon taxpayers who aren't anxious to shoulder the cost of local programs, the bureau's call to turn back the clock sounds awfully good. The problem is, it's too good to be true.

With no detectable changes whatsoever in federal land management laws, how can the BLM pronounce that things are different now? Are present and future court decisions really going to change just because the bureau believes they should? The last 15 years certainly contradicts that perspective. Is the current Congress really going to allow more logging on federal lands than we've seen in over 15 years? I don't think so!

Until the BLM's plan was released, most counties were beginning to acknowledge the inevitable: federal payments are eventually going to end. By proposing that timber receipts will once again fund county services in rural counties, the BLM's proposal only serves to confuse and distract citizens.

In the future, I hope that Oregon counties will receive more annual timber receipts than we have seen since the mid-1990s. But federal money will not cover the entire bill and we will need to develop local revenue sources. To achieve that goal, we have to hope the BLM will stop playing politics and provide a forest plan that is based on reality. Without such fanciful distractions, I am hopeful that timber-dependent counties throughout Oregon can at last make the transition to more self-reliant and fiscally stable county governments.

Dave **Toler** is a member of the Josephine County Board of Commissioners. The board expects to vote on an official position on the BLM plan in the near future. Reach him at [dtoler@co.josephine.or.us](mailto:dtoler@co.josephine.or.us) or 541-474-5221.

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*Author: DAVE TOLER*

*Section: Commentary*

*Page: D06*

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